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Knights of Malta (and U.S.) Picking New Chief

By ROBERTO SURO and SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES, APRIL 7, 1988

Princes, barons and some mere master knights are gathering here for a sacred conclave that will elect the next leader of an organization that is medieval in origin but increasingly American in membership.

Secluded in a villa overlooking the Tiber, a council of 36 electors will cast secret ballots for the next Grand Master of the Knights of Malta beginning Friday. If the winner is approved by Pope John Paul II, he will be addressed properly as "Your Most Eminent Highness," having the protocol status of both a Roman Catholic cardinal and a prince of the Holy Roman Empire. The title reflects the group's identity as both a religious order and a military organization born in 1113, during the Crusades.

Although the Knights maintain a variety of ideals and rituals dating back to a time when chivalry meant much more than good manners, these Christian soldiers are a changing lot. The order collects only modest dues from its 10,000 members but expects generous contributions to the medical and social welfare projects that it conducts in 90 countries.

Over their long history, the Knights have been caught up in a variety of diplomatic intrigues, and so it was only a mild shock a few months ago when one of their own confessed publicly that he was a double agent who worked for the Cuban secret services for 12 years while pretending to work for the Central Intelligence Agency, then headed by William J. Casey, himself a knight.

Mauro Casagrandi, the son of a prominent knight and the chargé d'affaires of the order's embassy in Havana, revealed his adventures a few weeks before he was to be invested as a knight. "Unfortunately, we could not even expel him because he was not a full member yet," said an official here. When the last Grand Master died, the Castro Government proclaimed three days of mourning in Cuba. Ostensibly, this was a tribute to the order's humanitarian work there, but as the official said, "I guess we were giving Castro more than we knew."

For centuries, full membership was restricted to people of noble ancestry, but in 1956 a new rank, "knights and dames of grace and devotion," was opened to commoners. Since then, membership has swelled, and now nearly 60 percent of the knights do not come from noble families.

Some of the fastest growth has been in the United States. The more than 2,000 Americans are the second largest national group, topped only by Italy, with nearly 3,000 members. The order has attracted Americans like the New York financier J. Peter Grace, the Washington lawyer Edward Bennett Williams and the former Cabinet secretaries Alexander M. Haig Jr. and William E. Simon.

"We have greatly increased the activities of the order by no longer requiring nobility as a condition of membership, but the traditions remain the same, and this is insured because almost all members

of the central government are still nobles," said Baron Felice Catalano di Melilli, the Grand Chancellor.

During the 25-year reign of the previous Grand Master, Fra Angelo de Mojana di Cologna, who died in January, the order faced growing competition from organizations that are set up to resemble it. Some of the imitation groups in effect sell knighthoods for as much as \$25,000, officials here said.

"It is a real headache," the baron said. About 20 groups, many in the United States, have uniforms and rituals resembling those of the Knights. But only the original group based in Rome has the status of a sovereign state and maintains diplomatic relations with more than 40 nations.

"We take legal action whenever we can," the baron said in an interview, "and we alert church authorities whenever we see a group trying to get sanction from a local bishop."

A major problem is the full name of the organization, the Sovereign Military Hospitaler Order of St. John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta. "Someone can take part of the name, the St. John or the Malta, go to a notary and create a group, and then people in good faith pay money to join, thinking they are becoming a real knight," the baron said.

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